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ARCHIVES AT THE MILLENNIUM: DIVERSITY, COMMUNITY, AND THE WORLD OF LEARNING

Linda M. Matthews

My theme today is building our future.¹ By future, I do not mean five or ten years from now, when we will have entered a new millennium, but next week and next month. For as soon as we say future in this fast moving age, it is here. Our future is defining and analyzing the problems and opportunities that face us, developing joint solutions, working together to make each of us stronger.

Many of us have been involved in developing strategic plans in our institutions, a process that can be both mind-numbing and mind-expanding. A strategic plan is a set of goals that will define the course of our development, strategic in the sense that from these goals will flow all other activities which will shape our future course. Were we to engage in a

¹ This article is a version of the keynote address delivered by the author at the annual meeting of the Society of Georgia Archivists, Atlanta, 14 November 1996.

similar exercise for the institutions managing primary sources in Georgia—if we saw ourselves as a collective whole and came together to plan our future as a collective whole—what would our strategic goals be? How would we conceive our future? I am not speaking here of a strategic plan for the Society of Georgia Archivists (although SGA members would be leaders in developing and carrying out this plan), but a plan for our community of institutions holding archival and primary sources. This cooperative plan, focusing on our community of repositories, should work in concert with the plan set out by the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board (GHRAB).²

A strategic plan must be based on the mission of the organization, institution, or group. Simply stated, our mission as Georgia repositories of archives and primary sources might be to appraise, acquire, preserve, and provide access to records of enduring value for legal, administrative, historical, and other research purposes and to promote knowledge about and the broad use of these materials as a part of our cultural heritage. That is only one possible—and fairly standard—mission statement. Together we could be much more creative. The GHRAB developed the following mission statement:

- to promote the educational use of Georgia's documentary heritage by all its citizens;
- to evaluate and improve conditions of records;

² Established in 1993 by the Georgia General Assembly, the board serves as the liaison to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for records grants awarded in the state and as advisory to the director of the Georgia Department of Archives and History.

- to conduct statewide planning for the preservation and access to Georgia's documentary resources;
- to encourage cooperation and collaboration among users and keepers of Georgia's historical records; and
- to advise the Secretary of State and the Georgia Department of Archives and History on issues concerning records.

To make the board's mission successful, our repositories must build a working coalition and strive to undertake joint planning and projects that move us forward toward common goals. The GHRAB, with staff support based at the state archives and chaired by the director, undertakes various survey and planning initiatives in concert with repositories across the state in furtherance of this broad mission. But GHRAB's effort cannot succeed without a strong, collaborative, and collegial effort on the part of Georgia's repositories. How can Georgia repositories work together, with GHRAB, to define a strong future for archives and primary sources in our state as we approach a new millennium? What will our strategic goals be, and how will we put them into action?

What follows are some thoughts on strategic goals towards which we should be working. Perhaps we, as a "primary sources" group in Georgia, can take a leading role in our peer group in putting forth a strategic plan for building our future.

The first is to cultivate, celebrate, and build strength from our diversity. This diversity is part of our program theme today. We have a wonderfully diverse primary sources community in Georgia—in size, collecting areas, institutional

contexts, and user communities. We need to learn more about each other, to help develop and promote each other's programs, and to become less inward in our everyday thinking. This can be difficult given the pace of our work lives, but always at the forefront of our minds should be how to take advantage of the opportunities to work in concert with each other.

This has been brought home to many of us, during these past eighteen months, as we have worked on the Georgia Archives and Manuscripts Automated Access Project (GAMMA), initiated by the University Center in Georgia's Special Collections Committee.³ Led by Susan McDonald and Beth Bensman, the project has uncovered exciting, and often related collections, in repositories large and small throughout Georgia. There are many things that we can learn from this project, and we should start thinking now about how to use it as a learning tool for the future. One thing we have certainly learned from the GAMMA project is how diverse we are, but we have also learned about our connectedness and how much remains to be done. Tremendous opportunity awaits us.

We should also be thinking about diversity in developing our collecting strategies. Are we continuing to collect along well-worn paths and not examining the areas of our heritage that remain relatively uncollected? Have we tried to broaden our perspective on the types of collections we are seeking?

³ This project was supported by the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board.

Can we build a collaborative collecting strategy that would have, as its goal, not competition but a plan to assure that important areas for research are not being neglected?

The second goal is to find ways to collaborate as a community of diverse archival repositories focused on common goals. We must find those things that make each of us distinctive—and promote those—and we must find the ties that bind us and weave those ever tighter. We are well past the time when we celebrate only the accomplishments of our individual institutions. Celebrations should be even more heartfelt for the achievements that we build together, and for those accomplishments that make all of us stronger. If one of us has a problem with preserving magnetic media, or housing unusual materials, or processing large modern collections, or training staff in new technologies, we can be sure that all of us have the same problem to one degree or another. It makes no sense for us individually to try to develop solutions on our own when, by working together, we can move all of our institutions forward. Perhaps we can develop some pilot projects together (similar to the GAMMA project) or other collaborative ways to make problem solving a community project rather than an institutional issue.

I offer one example. Processing of collections, particularly large modern collections made up of materials in many formats, is one of our greatest needs. Processing is not glamorous or trendy. But everything that we do depends upon it—from reference services to the digitizing projects that are so prominently on the agenda. Funding for archives processing from granting agencies is getting ever scarcer and finding money in our institutions for staff positions for

processing may be just as hard. Many of us are surely considering a review and revision of processing procedures to make our work more cost efficient and to use our limited staff resources to better advantage. And just as surely we must consider, if we have not already done so, revising the format of our descriptions, for few of these are intuitive to the user but are often a product of past processing methods or idiosyncracies. What if we proposed a joint processing project—with one or two circuit riding archivists who would process collections at several of our institutions? We would have to develop a joint agreement on level of processing, on procedures, indexing, and format of descriptions, but we might be able to get some of those long-backlogged collections available for research. Our directors would surely applaud us for finding ways to accomplish major work without asking for new permanent staff for each institution, and granting agencies would, I believe, be supportive of such collaborative initiatives that revise the way we think about a basic part of our work.

What this scenario would require is a commitment to work out guidelines and standards that would apply across institutions and an agreement to give up at least some of our institutional idiosyncratic procedures. A commitment to standards is a key to much of what we would accomplish in a collaborative way, and that is my third strategic initiative.

We must develop standards, guidelines, and best practices that will provide a foundation for collaboration. These guidelines and standards may not have to be rigid down to the last detail, but a commitment to broad standards is essential. We are being moved toward standards by technology, and the

MARC (machine-readable cataloging) format for bibliographic description in an online environment, which is the basis of our GAMMA project, was a major push in that direction. There is also the developing standard of Encoded Archival Description (EAD), which is the SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language) data type definition for archival finding aids recently developed by Berkeley, Yale, and several other institutions and now being tested in pilot projects. Sometime during the next year, we hope to begin a pilot project in Georgia, spearheaded by the Special Collections Committee of the University Center in Georgia, involving as many institutions as possible, to use the EAD to make our finding aids searchable online. Through such a project, which will mount our finding aids on the Internet in a searchable form, users will be able to search for specific names and topics and obtain much information about our holdings directly. There are many other standards and guidelines that we might work on together, involving preservation (such as for magnetic media) and perhaps policies and procedures for research services.

The fourth goal is to develop the broader thinking about access and the way we manage and market our institutions that the diversity of our user communities requires. We ask this question many times, but the answer is probably changing faster than it ever has. Who are our users (now commonly called our customers)? If we think of users as customers, and if we depended on these customers to stay in business, how would we be doing? Our access policies, our attitude toward our users, the ways in which we offer our services, and the services that we offer are largely dependent upon the type of

institution that we are. If we are a business archives or an institutional archives only, then we will have a different answer than a university special collections or local historical society. But if we collect original primary source materials, usually unique or at least rare, and are not an institutional archives, then we have other more diverse user communities.

These are not, even in a university, just scholarly or academic user groups. Our users range far beyond that. Yet the ways in which we in universities have traditionally promoted and publicized our holdings is largely for an academic audience. Historical societies and public libraries holding primary sources use other more "public" ways to publicize the use of archives and primary sources, but it is likely that potential users in the academic community are missing important materials that are held in these institutions. It is up to us to develop ways to use technology and our collective wisdom and creativity to build collaborative tools to promote knowledge of and access to the primary sources in all our collections. *The Directory of Historical Organizations and Resources in Georgia*, a project of GHRAB, now being updated and expanded, will be a major resource in this effort. We can find ways to link other access projects to this directory.

Talking more with our user communities is also key. How many times has each of us been told by someone who has just discovered our repository, often by chance, that we need to publicize our collections more and that the researcher had no idea about all the kinds of materials that could be found in an archives or special collections?

The Internet offers opportunities for us to make scholars and the public aware of what we have, but we must all develop our public relations and communications skills. Our training has not been in communication or public relations, but that is more than ever a part of our jobs. We must develop skills and knowledge far beyond those "processing" and "reference" skills that we learned in our educational programs as archivists and special collections librarians.

This leads to the fifth strategic goal. We must develop our knowledge and skills in ever broader ways and develop staff whose perspective is wide-ranging and focused on the exterior environment and the broad world of research and learning. Continuing education and staff development are major issues now and will be of ever increasing importance in the coming years. Harking back to my theme of community, we must develop ways as a primary sources community to build those skills and knowledge that will make us leaders in our institutions and organizations. Often this may mean larger institutions working with smaller institutions to develop workshops and training opportunities to assure that all of us have opportunities for learning. The Society of Georgia Archivists can play a lead role in this effort.⁴ The state archives, under the leadership of Edward Weldon and Brenda Banks, has promoted training opportunities in preservation and local government. But all of us must look for ways in which we can expand learning opportunities, particularly in

⁴Here I should mention the ongoing joint programs of SGA and the Georgia Historical Society in offering workshops for volunteers and part-time staff in small repositories and historical societies.

the use of technology and in keeping abreast of the latest developments in this increasingly complex field.

What are the real needs in continuing education? What do our staff members need to know in order to manage our collections professionally and to respond to user needs effectively? What are the qualities and qualifications that we should be seeking to attract and develop in the profession? Beyond education and experience, we need staff who can appreciate and respond to the interconnectivity of research institutions and their user communities, who can understand the broad environment in which we must work, who understand the need for constant communication, and who can deal with change.

The sixth goal is to make our vision global and our plans reflect the global research environment. Access is global. With the communications infrastructure of the modern world and the interdependence of economies and telecommunications, we no longer can think of our collections in a local, regional, or even national sense. We must think of our collections as part of a global research network. Our users get to us by electronic mail and find information on the Internet. Of course, they will expect services and access to the materials that we have without having to visit our repositories. We can give many reasons why we are unable to provide all of these services—staff time, fragile materials, copyright, etc., etc.—but should not we instead be thinking about how we are going to change our services to adapt to new research needs?

I still think that researchers who spend time in an archives working with original materials take something away from that

experience that makes a better book, or dissertation—something intangible and human, an immediacy that finds its way into the product of that research. In the global community, and in this digital environment, however, researchers will be asking for different services. No, we cannot at this time digitize all of our collections—neither time nor money will be available for that in the foreseeable future (although things change quickly). But we need to think about the global community and global access—and, in so thinking, thereby improve access to users closer to home.

Could we perhaps put together a digital project, among a group of Georgia institutions, that would both provide greater access to some important materials and that would serve to promote knowledge about our holdings? The digital environment now seems like mass confusion, with every institution rushing to digitize something. Finding all of that unorganized stuff and making some sense of it is inordinately difficult. Could we have a goal of building a community digital project around a theme in Georgia history? Is there a way to work together to think globally and use the digital environment to promote access, learning, and the visibility of our Georgia collections?

The final goal is then that we all assume the responsibility of leadership. In essence, we should all be leaders in whatever position we hold, and we must lead by example. Leadership means assuming responsibility for creative solutions, for communicating effectively with our colleagues and our users, for promoting the image of archives and primary sources as a profession of broad perspective and vision, for promoting our resources as a vital part of the world

of research and learning, for thinking globally and outwardly, not provincially and inwardly.

As leaders, we must communicate effectively the value of archives in the modern research environment, be prepared to demonstrate the relevance of our work in the digital information age, and make ourselves key players in our organizations. We can show ourselves leaders in the services that we offer, in the creativity with which we approach our work and solutions to problems, in our understanding of organizational and community issues, and in our creative use of technology.

A leader is not necessarily a department head, manager, or supervisor. We in archives have always appreciated leaders at every level. A leader is someone who understands the key role that everyone plays in meeting our mission and who assumes personal responsibility for moving the organization forward. One of our strategic goals, then, should be to develop leaders for our organizations and our profession.

How might we create a strategic plan and move it forward? What are the issues that we, as an archives community, want to see addressed by the year 2000? What do we want to accomplish? My thoughts, not fully drawn nor fully examined, are a way of ruminating with you on the legacy that we want to leave to those archivists and user communities who come after us. Shortly before I started my archives career, when I was still among the "user" community as a history graduate student, I went into an archives repository in a southern state (not Georgia) and asked the desk attendant if there was a guide to the collections. "Yes,"

he responded, "but she's at lunch right now." That was a long time ago, and we have come very far in our access policies, descriptive tools, and public outreach. How much farther can we go? Time and imagination are our limits.

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